

Moving Forward Looking Back: Anniversaries, Remembrance and the Anglo-German Relationship in 2014

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Dr. Helene von Bismarck, Associate Editor

Both in Britain and in Germany, 2014 was a period when looking back was very much on top of the agenda. The list of historical events that were commemorated – some of them with joy, others with great solemnity – is as long as it is impressive: the 300th jubilee of the accession to the British throne by the House of Hanover, the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War, the 70th anniversary of the D-day landings in Normandy and the fall of the Berlin Wall 25 years ago. What these anniversaries have in common is that they concern both Britons and Germans, because they raise awareness of important landmarks in the histories of both countries and point to the extent these histories have met and influenced one another. Even the last item on the list, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, was – at least indirectly – also a milestone of British history, because it symbolized the end of the Cold War, as well as the unification of a strengthened middle power at the centre of Europe, two issues that have been of great consequence to Britain.

There are two reasons why it is worthwhile to take a closer look at how these important historical events have been celebrated and remembered in Britain and Germany, respectively, during the past year: it helps assess the long-term consequences that these landmarks of Anglo-German history have had, and it tells us a lot about the present rapport between the two countries. What should concern us is not only whether new breakthroughs in academic scholarship have been achieved in 2014, but how the Hanoverian accession, the First and the Second World War and the end of the Cold War have been discussed in the public sphere. As all professional historians know, even though they may not like to think about it, their perception of these events, no matter how accurate it may be, does not automatically resonate within society at large, because the impact of academic publications often remains limited to a very small circle. A year of anniversaries like 2014 is a useful reminder that the impact of past

events on the present day manifests itself in more than one way: through the individual experience of memory, through the cultural and political act of public remembrance and through the intellectual endeavour of scholars, who try to make history intelligible with the help of sources and (ideally) a sound methodology. It is through the culture of remembrance and the public debate about the past in Britain and Germany that deep-seated and widespread mutual perceptions are made visible. The cluster of anniversaries in 2014 can thus be regarded as a mirror reflecting the current state of the Anglo-German relationship beyond the arena of high politics.

On the British side, 2014 was a year witnessing sincere and far-reaching efforts to learn more about Germany's history and culture and to make this knowledge available to the public at large. The tricentenary of the coronation in London of the first Hanoverian king, George I, was not only commemorated with a splendid service at St-Martin-in-the-Fields in the presence of the Duke of Kent and the German ambassador, it also occasioned the organisation of a number of exhibitions, lectures and concerts dealing with the Georgian age.^[i] While each of these events had a different focus, two general trends in the presentation of the comparatively little known 123-year Hanoverian period of British history became apparent: the attempt to underline the relevance to Britain's road to modernity of the Georgian age, with its important innovations in the arts, design, music and science, and the readiness to paint a more positive picture of the Georgian kings, who had for a long time suffered from a largely negative reputation summed up in the rather brutal yet popular description as 'the sad, the bad, the mad and the fat'. There was also a new emphasis on the importance of the German origins of the royal family. BBC 4 ran a miniseries on the Georgian age and went as far as far as calling this program 'The German Kings who made Britain'^[ii], while Desmond Shawe-Taylor, Surveyor of The Queen's pictures at The Queen's Gallery, where a major exhibition on this subject was held, claimed that their status as German outsiders enabled the Hanoverian monarchs to act as successful modernizers in Britain.^[iii]

Another and even more impressive example of British endeavours to use 2014, the year of anniversaries, as an occasion to understand the German point of view better has been the exhibition 'Germany: Memories of a Nation' that is still on view in the British Museum and was visited by Angela Merkel and David Cameron in early January 2015. Together with a lecture series broadcasted on Radio BBC 4 by the British Museum's director, Neil MacGregor, and a book with the same title, this has been a remarkable attempt to make Germany intelligible to the British public. Exhibition, lecture series and book are not satisfied with presenting an overview of German history, they endeavour to explain the perceptions most Germans have of their own identity and culture. Taking the reunification after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 as an intellectual starting point, they try to explain the German point of view by focusing on the memories that the inhabitants of this modern Germany share. Without leaving out the horrible chapters of German history, and the guilt and shame that Germans have to deal with until this day, MacGregor still paints an overwhelmingly generous picture of Germany as a nation where design, philosophy, music, the arts and engineering have flourished over centuries. In the end, what has emerged is so positive a portrayal of Germany that quite a few German historians and intellectuals would probably feel uncomfortable with it. MacGregor's professed aim has been to show that there is much more to Germany than the two world wars, on which school syllabi and public debate have been focused in Britain for decades. That the British Museum, arguably one of the most important and influential museums not only in Britain, but the world, presented such an exhibition in the year of the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War is nothing short of astonishing. It is an important sign that British perceptions of Germany have significantly shifted since the

Berlin Wall came down, a time when Britain's Prime Minister, Mrs. Thatcher, had still been very much afraid of the German 'national character'.

On the German side, the anniversaries of 2014 have not occasioned a comparable surge of interest in, and empathy with, Britain. Only the 300th anniversary of the Hanoverian accession has led to an outpouring of new scholarship as well as a number of commemorating events, most importantly the grand exhibition organized by the *Land Niedersachsen*, 'The Hanoverians on Britain's Throne'.^[iv] A number of British scholars contributed to the organisation of this show, which displayed a substantial number of exhibits on loan from the Royal Collection. The other 2014 anniversaries, while publically and solemnly commemorated, have not led to visible new enquiries into the Anglo-German relationship. This is due to the fact that both world wars are primarily regarded by the majority of Germans as tragic and horrible landmarks in the history of their nation and Europe as a whole, but are not so much analyzed through the Anglo-German lens. Still, what is interesting is that the public debate about the First World War, a debate that reached a whole new level of intensity in 2014, was largely dominated by the controversy about a book by the Cambridge historian Christopher Clark, called 'The Sleepwalkers', in which he takes a multilateral approach in his quest for the reasons for the outbreak of war in 1914.^[v] His argument, which absolves Germany from the charge of unique or even main responsibility, has not by any means remained undisputed by other scholars, but his views have still had an outstanding effect on the public debate about the First World War. Apart from selling an impressive number of books, Clark filled lecture halls all over the country, was courted by the media and even invited to host a show on the national television channel ZDF (the German version of BBC 2) called 'Die Deutschland-Saga', in which he pretty much explained their own country to the German populace. Clark may be of Australian, not of British origin, but he has worked in Britain since he was a graduate student. His success in Germany and the fact that the wider public is so interested in the perception of their country by a historian who is in many ways a product of Britain's academic system, can be interpreted as signalling a certain degree of open-mindedness and respect for British scholars on the German side that makes one hopeful for further intellectual and cultural exchange between the two countries in the future.

2015 can be expected to be a year when Britain's role in the world will be under constant debate and may be shaped in significant ways. The outcome of the upcoming general elections will in all likelihood have a far-reaching effect on Britain's relationship with the European Union, given David Cameron's promise that he will renegotiate the terms of British membership and organize an in-or-out-referendum if he is re-elected. It is of course up to the British to decide whether or not their fate lies with the continent. However, in view of Germany's strong position within the EU, the Anglo-German relationship may have a role to play in the shaping of that fate. Currently, it does not look as if the British and German governments will look eye-to-eye with regard to European integration. However, before we move into 2015 in a state of gloom about the differences between the two countries, it may be worth keeping in mind that the past year of remembrance has shown remarkable attempts, especially on the British side, to promote interest and understanding in one another. It may be the job of governments to decide which role they wish their country to play in international affairs, but this does not alter the fact that there is much more to a country's place in the world, and its rapport with other nations, than the current state of its foreign policy.

[i] A list of these events can be found at <http://www.london.diplo.de/Vertretung/london/en/091-Personalunion/0Personalunion.html>

[ii] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01wq5xr>

[iii] <http://www.royalcollection.org.uk/exhibitions/the-first-georgians-art-monarchy-1714-1760/video-warrior-kings-0>

[iv] <http://www.royals-aus-hannover.de/en/> The exhibition is now closed but there is an excellent catalogue accompanying it that remains available: Katja Lembke (ed.), *Als die Royals aus Hannover kamen. Hannovers Herrscher auf Englands Thron 1914-1837* (Sandstein Verlag 2014).

[v] Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to War in 1914* (Allen Lane, London 2013).

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